

THE LAST DAYS OF JEWISH SALONICA

What Happened to a 450-Year-Old Civilization

CECIL ROTH

THE fate of the Jews of Salonica at the hands of the Nazis is an episode of recent history that for some reason or other has been relatively overlooked. Yet, even in recent history, there are few stories more terrible.

On the eve of World War II, Salonica, Greece's third largest city, had a Jewish population of some 50,000 in a total of 240,000; compared to the past, this represented a sharp decline for what was traditionally a Jewish city. The ancient intellectual preeminence had also waned somewhat. But Salonica was still the greatest center of Sephardic Jewry, with its synagogues and academies, its rabbis and its teachers, its newspapers and its printing presses, and some scholars of distinction among the sixty rabbis and communal functionaries. Moreover, the city was still a happy hunting ground for Spanish philologists and scholars, anxious to trace, in the speech of the descendants of the exiles of 1492, the authentic accent and folklore of 15th-century Castile; and the old folk still paraded along the quayside on a Sabbath afternoon in medieval Spanish costume.

Economically, the Jewish community was well balanced. Certainly, there was here no excessive proportion of professional men. (Indeed, the number was so low that the community officially employed non-Jewish physicians.) There were now no great fortunes. There were many petty shopkeepers;

but the bulk of the community were, as their ancestors had been, peddlers, craftsmen, and manual laborers. Whatever bogey of Jewish "influence" and "infiltration" could be erected by German anti-Semitism elsewhere in Europe, it had no relevance whatsoever in the case of Salonica's old-established, picturesque, hard-working Jewish masses. Yet this fact did not save them.

The account that follows—the first detailed report in the English language, I believe—is based in part on reports received by the writer in the course of a visit to Greece not long after liberation, in part on the invaluable material assembled by M. Michael Molho, the sole surviving spiritual leader of Salonican Jewry, in a touching work, *In Memoriam*, which he has devoted to this subject.

WHEN Paul of Tarsus visited Salonica, in the year 50 CE, he found there a strong Jewish community with its synagogue, in which, we are informed, he preached for three Sabbaths in succession. The community's history may already have gone back some generations; afterwards, certainly, it was uninterrupted down to modern times.

The Turks were soldiers and peasants, uninterested in trade and inexpert in handicrafts. The Jews were merchants and craftsmen, long excluded from the land and inexpert in war. Hence the two peoples were in a sense complementary; and when the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492 the Sultan tolerantly opened the gates of his empire to them. Most of them settled naturally in the seaports; and above all in Salonica, which from this time onwards was one of Europe's greatest Jewish communities—for a time, indeed, the greatest. It was a microcosm of the Jewish world. There were refugees from France, Italy, Germany, Hungary,

CECIL ROTH, historian and Jewish scholar, here tells the final terrifying chapter in the Nazi destruction of Salonican Jewry—a community of some fifty thousand Sephardic Jews. Dr. Roth has written widely on Jewish subjects; his most recent work, *A History of the Jews in England*, was published in 1941. He was born in London in 1899 and studied at Oxford, where he later became a reader in post-Biblical Jewish studies. He has frequently lectured in America.

Calabria, Apulia, Sicily, and every province and city of Spain, each group maintaining its own synagogue and congregation.

For a while the Jews were probably a majority of the population. They not only controlled trade and industry, but also provided the artisans, the fishermen, the stevedores, and the harbor workers (almost down to our own day no ship could unload in the port on the Sabbath). The fashions, the habits, the dishes, the languages, the costumes, and even the lullabies of Toledo and Seville, as they had existed in the age of Ferdinand and Isabella, were incongruously perpetuated, generation after generation. Indeed, it has been said that could Columbus have returned to this earth four centuries after his momentous voyage, he would have found himself more at home in Salonica than in Palos. Every synagogue had its academy attached to it, and for many generations the city was one of the world's centers of rabbinic learning.

DOWN to the beginning of the 20th century, the picture remained almost unchanged. The community had suffered great material losses, indeed, in periodic conflagrations, and even greater spiritual disillusionment in the 17th century when it pinned over-great hopes on the false messiah of Smyrna, Sabbatai Zevi (whose secret votaries, the Domneh, posing as Moslems, were still numerous and influential in Salonica until a few years ago). But Salonica remained largely a Jewish city, having in 1912, at the close of the period of Turkish rule, a Jewish population of over 80,000 (excluding the Domneh) out of a total of 173,000. The great fire of 1917 during World War I destroyed their ancient quarter and left 50,000 of them homeless; economic instability, inflation, anti-Semitic agitation in the following years caused a considerable emigration, mostly to France, Palestine, and Latin America; the exchanges of population between Greece and Turkey brought about a rapid artificial expansion of the Greek population (hitherto a minority), and a forced process of Hellenization. But life remained at least tolerable when it was not actually pleasant.

ON APRIL 9, 1941, at about nine o'clock in the morning, the first German armed columns entered Salonica. Two days later, the *Messagero*—the sole surviving Judeo-Spanish daily paper—was suppressed, and a number of houses and public buildings were requisitioned for military needs, including the Jewish hospital founded by Baron de Hirsch and bearing his name. On April 15, the communal council was arrested and its offices raided. In the course of the following week, placards forbidding entrance to Jews began to make their appearance in the cafés, and later on all Jews were ordered to give up their radios.

Meanwhile, a new quisling newspaper had begun to make its appearance, the "New Europe" (*Néa Evropi*), which devoted a great deal of its space to anti-Semitic propaganda in the full Goebbels style. But, clearly, everything was going to be done in an orderly fashion. The Germans even nominated a new president of the community to transmit their orders; and when the *soi-disant* Prime Minister, General Tsolacoglou, visited the city, he gave comforting reassurances to a Jewish deputation which waited on him.

For over a year no specific anti-Jewish regulations were applied. There were occasional cases of assault, Jews were arrested or even executed on other charges (e.g., of Communism, after the invasion of Russia), and there was terrible economic distress. But nothing was done against the Jewish community as such; and a false sense of security had begun to spread.

The beginning of the persecution was in a disguised form, as was the Nazi practice. It came in the summer of 1942 on Saturday, July 11, when orders were issued for all adult male Jews between the ages of eighteen and forty-five to present themselves to be enrolled for forced labor at Liberty Square, where in 1908 the Young Turks had proclaimed the new regime for all the peoples of the Ottoman Empire. Here they were kept, packed together under the broiling sun, until the afternoon, surrounded by companies of soldiers armed with machine guns, the slightest movement being savagely punished. Many

were sent off immediately to malaria-stricken areas where they worked in the sun ten hours a day, with inadequate rations. Within ten weeks, 12 per cent of those taken had died.

Ultimately, after prolonged negotiations, the Germans agreed to exempt the Jews from forced labor in return for a ransom of two and a half billion drachmae, equivalent to about 40,000 US gold dollars. The bulk of the sum was raised, with enormous difficulty. It seemed that the community was saved.

HOWEVER, there were in the following months more and more expropriations and seizures of Jewish businesses, warehouses, and property. This culminated when, in December 1942, the ancient cemetery, containing nearly half a million graves and dating back certainly to the 15th century, was expropriated and thus became a quarry for the entire city; tombstones of inestimable historic value, as well as those erected by persons still alive, were removed regardless of age or associations, and can still be seen all over the city used as paving stones, or even to line latrines.

Throughout Europe, the Nazi authorities showed a somewhat paradoxical interest in Jewish libraries, intellectual treasures, and ritual objects: partly because what was valuable could be sold (even if it first had to be melted down), partly because they were engaged in building up at Frankfort, for anti-Semitic purposes, what was rapidly becoming the world's greatest Jewish research library. The ancient fame of Salonica attracted special attention; and not long after the German occupation a section of the Kommando Rosenberg, which supervised this important matter, installed itself in the former American consulate, its work being under the direction of a not incompetent scholar, Dr. J. Pohl, director of the Hebrew section of the Frankfort Institute. All the libraries and synagogues of Salonica were now raided and their treasures seized, packed, and dispatched northward by these perverted collectors. (It is even said that they included in their number expert forgers, who introduced material for anti-Jew-

ish libels in their booty whenever it was possible.) It was noticed that some of these "experts" looked at everything from the point of view of German history. They were making frenzied inquiries into the exact position of the ghetto that they assumed had once existed in Salonica, and seemed disappointed when they discovered that in this quasi-Jewish city, which had formed part of the tolerant Turkish Empire, there had never been (and indeed could not have been) anything of the sort. Why this exaggerated antiquarian interest? The reason was very soon to become apparent.

AT THIS stage, the puppet-president of the community, whom the Germans had nominated when they first arrived, was removed from office and replaced by the rabbi, Dr. Koretz. It is necessary to devote a few lines to this unhappy figure. He was not a Salonican in origin. The community, feeling the need for a rabbi of Western education, one who could better represent them vis-à-vis their fellow citizens and the government, had appointed this Eastern European Ashkenazi, trained in a German rabbinical seminary, to the post, which he had filled not without dignity for a number of years. Regarding Germany with the fundamental deference that was once universal among Eastern European Jews; brought up in that country, and imbued with veneration for its intellectual achievement; speaking German, and thus able to enter into personal contact with the occupying authorities—he was unable to believe the worst of them and had tended from the first to temporize. He became convinced that by unquestioning compliance the Nazis' resentment (he did not realize that it was in fact an implacable hatred) might be mollified. Now, in his double capacity, both as rabbi and as president, he not only carried out every German instruction but also urged his community to obey implicitly.

It is on this policy that the few surviving Salonican Jews put the blame for the fact that the disaster which burst upon them was so overwhelming and universal and that so few escaped. Some of them go so far in their

bitterness as to accuse Koretz of having been in effect a German agent. It certainly seems that he displayed not only a deplorable weakness but also a degree of compliance that, in the circumstances, verged upon treachery. In due course, his work was seconded by a local Jew, of the lowest origin, named Vital Hasson. About the latter's function there was no doubt; he was a traitor and quisling interested only in the satisfaction of his own greeds and vices.

By the beginning of 1943, the mechanism had been prepared and all the preliminaries finished. The time had now arrived for the acceleration of the persecution. In the course of six months, between February and August of that year, Salonican Jewry met its doom.

ON FEBRUARY 6 a commission headed by Dieter Wisliceny and Aloïs Brünner arrived in Salonica to put the racial laws into operation. The same day an order was drawn up (it was issued two days later) imposing the supreme indignities that had already become the rule elsewhere in Nazi-dominated Europe. All Jews were henceforth to wear a special distinguishing badge, of yellow color, in the shape of the Star of David—their shops and offices also had to be similarly marked. A special ghetto quarter was to be set up, in which all Jews were to be concentrated. Within a few days, further regulations were issued elaborating these instructions and indicating, in the spirit of the Nuremberg Laws, precisely what was necessary in order to qualify a person as a Jew and subject him to these restrictions. One hundred thousand yellow badges were manufactured, at top speed, so that every Jew of either sex, from the age of five upwards, could have one on his overcoat as well as on his ordinary clothing; each bore a distinctive number which corresponded with that on his special registration card. Within a few days, the Salonican Jews were marked off like pariahs.

No single Jewish quarter was set up (that was impossible in view of the circumstances) but a number of areas were marked off in those districts which were largely inhabited by Jews. The space assigned was neverthe-

less hopelessly inadequate, four or six families often being crowded together in accommodations suited only for one. Any Jew who changed his residence without permission was treated as a deserter and shot outright. No Jew was allowed in the public streets after nightfall; no Jew was allowed to use the telephone; no Jew could ride on the tramway or any other sort of conveyance.

Camouflaging their intent, the authorities maintained the pretext that the new system would facilitate the reorganization of the Jewish community on quasi-autonomous lines, independent of the city as such. There was to be a Jewish mayor and Jewish chamber of commerce; and a Jewish police force was organized in order to maintain order. But the real object of the new provisions (which Rabbi Koretz had obediently proclaimed to his flock, from the pulpit of the synagogue) gradually emerged. If the Jews were isolated, they could be despoiled with greater ease; and having been despoiled, they could be exterminated. Simultaneously with the creation of the ghettos, a detailed inquiry was ordered into all the property of every sort in Jewish hands, including even domestic animals and household furniture. The reason soon became clear.

On March 13, a proclamation was issued placing upon the Jewish community the duty of administering all Jewish property, except household goods and other articles of the most simple description. Everything possible was to be transformed with all speed into cash, which was to be deposited in the banks in a collective credit; and upwards of one hundred communal notables were designated as hostages to insure that these and all the other instructions were punctually obeyed. This in effect signified utter spoliation, under a mildly euphemistic title.

One of the finest villas in Salonica, in Velissariou Street, had already been taken over as the headquarters of the Commission for Jewish Affairs; and this, its floors strewn with priceless stolen carpets and its cellars filled with accumulated stolen treasures, became the scene of sadistic tortures by day and bacchanalian revelries by night. Hither-

to, Jews had been restricted to the ghetto areas only by night. They were now forbidden to leave them even by day. There was no longer any question of these districts being autonomous units; they were obviously intended only as prisons or condemned cells, pending the execution of sentence.

SOME half-century before, the charitable Baron de Hirsch had paid for the construction near the railway station of a number of little houses, to give shelter to Jewish refugees from the Russian pogroms. This was to be the scene of the final tragedy. While the ghetto legislation was being perfected and enforced, this district, which had a population of something less than 2,500 souls massed together in 593 rooms, was being divided off from the rest of the city—not by the usual barbed wire, but by a fence of high planks. There were three entrances, each surmounted by a trilingual inscription, in German, Greek, and Ladino; and outside, searchlights and machine guns were installed. It was thus a ghetto in a fuller sense than the other newly designated Jewish quarters. But its function was to be even more sinister than this; it was to serve as the corral where the human cattle were to be rounded up at the last, before being taken to the slaughter. Three hundred empty railway wagons were known to be lined up on the sidings, awaiting the victims.

On the morning of Sunday, March 14, the inhabitants of the Hirsch quarter were instructed to assemble in the local synagogue, where they were informed by Rabbi Koretz that they were to be deported to Poland. With what was, at the most charitable interpretation, an unbelievable naivety, he informed them that they would find a new home there, among their own people; the great Jewish community of Cracow (could he have been unaware that Cracow Jewry had already been destroyed?) would receive them as brothers, and each man would find employment in accordance with his aptitude and experience. To give some verisimilitude to the farce, some Polish paper money was made available to the victims; they were of

course forbidden to take with them any gold or silver or anything else of value, or more than twenty kilograms of personal property done up in bundles (valises were not allowed).

The next morning, the inhabitants of the quarter were assembled and marched to the station, where they were driven into the waiting cars, which were soon overladen to twice their capacity, closed, and then sealed. Soon the cargo of human misery began its journey to the Polish slaughterhouse. Four hundred and fifty-one years before, their ancestors had been the victims of one of the greatest tragedies in the history of medieval Europe when they had been driven out of Spain, hoping in vain for a miracle that would save them at the last moment. Now an age had come when miracles were no longer even hoped for.

The Hirsch quarter was now clear, and ready to receive a new convoy. A few hours later the ghetto in the Aghia Paraskevi district was suddenly surrounded, and its inhabitants were ordered to be ready to leave in twenty minutes. They were then marched—aged, children, invalids, cripples—to the Hirsch quarter, where they were joined on the next day by the Jews of the district near the smaller station. On Wednesday, March 17, another convoy left for the north, under much the same conditions as before (though, to do him justice, the rabbi secured some slight alleviation). Day by day, thenceforth, these scenes repeated themselves, group after group being dispatched to the Hirsch quarter and convoy after convoy, each of some 2,800 persons, being sent off.

There was a brief interlude in the middle of March, when military requirements necessitated the recruitment of forced labor. But this did not last for long; moreover, the treatment of the laborers was so appalling that most persons preferred the alternative of deportation, many still pathetically believing the tale that they were being sent to start a new life in a distant region. Indeed, such are the unfathomable resources of human optimism that there was a veritable epidemic of marriages at this time, even in the Hirsch quarter

itself. On the eve of deportation, as many as a hundred young couples would be married on a single day, here or in the other ghettos, with the pathetically incongruous traditional formula in which praise is offered to the God who created man in his own image, who makes the bridegroom to rejoice in his bride, and who will speedily cause the streets of Jerusalem to resound to the happy voice of youths and maidens newly joined in wedlock.

FEW details are known as to what happened to the deportees in the course of their tragic journey northwards. But their fate was in all cases the same. The talk of sending them to start a fresh life in Poland was nothing but mockery; by this time no Jew survived in Cracow, which was supposed to be their destination. The trains were directed one after the other to the great annihilation camps of Oswiecim (Auschwitz) and the adjacent Brzezinka (Birkenau) in Poland, where more than 1,750,000 Jews from various countries were murdered during this period (this is in addition to the 1,500,000 who were murdered in Maidanek). Here, far away from their sunny home, the Salonican Jews were exterminated. The number of survivors who escaped by flight or by some other means* was infinitesimal.

It is to be reported, with the most profound regret, that the general population of Salonica did not show that degree of practical sympathy with their harried fellow townfolk which was encountered in some other cities, and many did not shun a profit from the Jewish distress. On the other hand, there were some among them, if not many, who did what they could to help, even at the risk of their lives, and it was to them that most of the tiny handful of survivors owed their escape. This was the case especially, it may be remarked, in the surrounding countryside, where the Germans applied the same regime as in the city itself. Out of thirty-three Jews

at a little place named Aicatherine, for example, all except three who had been shot were able to take refuge in the neighborhood villages, disguised as peasants. On a far larger scale was the help given by the Italian authorities, both military and civil, who, true to their finest and happiest tradition, refused to collaborate with their German allies and did everything that they could to help Jews escape by giving them false papers of nationality, sending them away in military convoys, or declaring them members of their own families. On the other hand, the Bulgarians, who indeed refused to collaborate in any excesses of anti-Semitism in their own country, had no such scruples in the portions of Greece which they occupied. Here, the annihilation of the Jews was almost complete, rising to 96 per cent, 98 per cent, and even (as at Xanthiex, where there were only six survivors out of a community of 550) 99 per cent.

FROM March 15 onwards, there were only the briefest interruptions in the deportations. Further convoys, each of the regulation size, left the Salonica railway station at intervals of two or three days in the second half of March; nine in April; and two at the beginning of May, these including persons who had been rounded up in other cities of Macedonia where there were Jewish communities, such as Florina, Demotica, and Verria. The ghetto police force, of which the Germans had made considerable use for enforcing their orders, was now superfluous, and its members, who no doubt had hoped for preferential treatment, were sent to join their co-religionists. The most despicable figure of all, Vital Hasson, suffered from no illusion, and fled in good time, to be rounded up and condemned to death, however, after the German defeat (though the execution of the sentence was inexplicably delayed). Certain persons, whose services had been used by the Germans for purposes of communal organization and discipline, were dispatched, as they were informed, to the relatively favored fortress-ghetto of Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia, where a good number of Jews in fact

*In Italy in 1945, and in the Balkans in 1946, I met Salonican Jews, their wrists tattooed with their prison-camp numbers and still in their eyes looks of horror which would never pass away; they owed their lives to the fact that they had been employed to stoke the furnaces of the crematoria.

survived; but they too ended in the crematoria. At the end of June, those Jews who were of Italian nationality were sent to Athens, though after the fall of Mussolini they were rounded up and deported; those who, owing to the romantic Judeophilism of the Spanish government before Franco, could claim Spanish protection, but were not wanted in Spain, went to Bergen-Belsen; a number ultimately managed, however, to get to Casablanca or even to a new life in Tel Aviv.

Of the Salonican community, there were left now only the survivors of those who had been sent to forced labor. They were now rounded up, malaria-stricken, emaciated, and half naked, and on August 7 they too were deported, to the number of 1,200. This was the nineteenth convoy. It was also the last; for there were no more Jews left.

ALL told, there had been deported from Salonica in these few months (the exact figures are available) 46,091 Jews, of whom approximately 44,000 were natives of the city and the remainder from the surrounding countryside and neighboring towns. Of these, 45,650 were sent directly to Poland where they were exterminated; the remaining handful went to Bergen-Belsen, where some of them survived—including Rabbi Koretz, who, however, died, perhaps fortunately for himself, on the morrow of liberation. Of the 5,000 Salonican Jews not deported, many had already succumbed to their sufferings in forced labor; others had found refuge in the surrounding countryside or else in Athens where (largely owing to the noble lead of the Patriarch Damascenos, who, alas, had no imitator in Salonica) a goodly proportion of the Jews were saved by the complicity of the Christian population.

In October 1944, Salonica was recaptured by the Greek and Allied forces. A handful of Jews drifted back in due course to the city whose history had been intertwined so closely with their own for two thousand years. They found their homes occupied, their property

looted, all but two or three out of their nineteen synagogues destroyed, their five-century-old cemetery still used as a quarry.

Amid the ruins, this remnant set themselves to build up their lives anew. Perhaps they may succeed in reconstituting a community, but it will be one like any other small Jewish congregation anywhere in the world. The community which once numbered nearly 50 per cent of the total city population of 173,000 is now insignificant, less than one per cent out of the present 250,000. Moreover, all that Salonican Jewry had stood for—that strange island of 15th-century Spain in a setting of 20th-century Greece—is gone forever. With it has gone, unnoticed and unlamented, the cultural environment which made the city for so long a center of interest for philologists, historians, folklorists, and lovers of the picturesque. It is not only a community that has been annihilated, but also a way of life.

IN THE summer of 1946 I went to Greece on behalf of the British War Office to lecture to the troops, and had the horrible experience of visiting this charnel house of historic memories. In the synagogue, on Sabbath morning, there was barely a *minyan*. There was as yet no religious education for the children. There was hardly any provision for other fundamental religious requirements. Everywhere one could see traces of loot. I found a child in the street sitting on a synagogue chair carved with a Hebrew inscription; I was given a fragment of a Sefer Torah which had been cut up as soles for a pair of shoes; I saw carts in the cemetery removing Hebrew tombstones, on the instructions of the Director of Antiquities for the province, for the repair of one of the local ancient churches.

But a Greek hawker in the street was selling eggs cooked in the traditional Sephardic sabbatical fashion, *huevos enjaminados*, now become a local delicacy. Jewish life had been all but exterminated, but this relic of the Jewish cuisine curiously survived.